

WHAT IS AGROECOLOGY?

The academic field that bridges agriculture, nature and society.

Agroecology links practice and science in describing, analyzing, and managing complex agroecosystems. We focus on integrating ecology, agriculture, socio-economics, and culture with an ultimate goal of sustaining production, food security, community and environmental health.

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A Word from the Editor:

Agroecology is a complex mix of thinking for the planet while acting in a locally appropriate manner. The articles in this newsletter deal with the global transmission of agroecology-related thinking, from the spread of Norwegian course ideas to the U.S. to the spread of a Norwegian institution to Guatemala to promote education and land rights among indigenous farmers. Indeed, graduates from the UMB Agroecology program are working all over the world, on every kind of food and farming related issue. The program provides the knowledge students need to recognize problems and improve situations, while also encouraging flexibility and responsiveness to the context at hand.

Norway Agroecology Promotes Courses in the U.S.

by Chuck Francis

One clear indication of the success of the Agroecology and Farming Systems course is the impact it has on other courses. As a result of the PhD courses in Stange, Norway from 1995 to 1997, a similar initiative was launched as a cooperative activity in Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota, U.S.A. We started the new course, Agroecosystems Analysis, in 1998 to spend one week visiting farms in the three-state Midwest area. Student teams decide on their criteria for questions and how to explore the production, economic, environmental, and social implications and impacts of current farming practices and systems on ten farms. They interview farmers, walk the fields and corrals, ask endless questions, and then have time to reflect and assimilate an immense amount of information from this intensive week. The culmination is a day-long session where each student team presents their cross-farm analysis and conclusions about sustainability. A month after the farm visits and oral report, each team presents a written project document and each individual sends in a learner reflection report. This course will be held for the 11th time in July 2008.

Several years ago, a young and motivated teacher from Washington State University participated as a faculty observer. Extremely exciting to us was the formation of a similar course in cooperation with WSU and University of Idaho in the northwest U.S. It is this type of multiplier effect that demonstrates the value and wide applicability of the teaching methods used in agroecology. We also published a book, "Agroecosystems Analysis", in 2004 (editors Diane Rickerl and Charles Francis) that is used as a prime reference for the continuing courses in the U.S. We hope this idea continues to spread, and much of the credit goes to the innovative courses in Norway at UMB.



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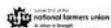
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From the Ground Up



**A Primer for Community Action
on Kingston and Countryside's Food System**

Prepared for the National Farmers Union,
Local 214 and Food Down the Road
by Chris Wilton & Holly Kowalski
October 1st, 2007
Kingston, Canada



UMB Agroecology Lessons at the Heart of the 21st Century's Food Challenge

by Andrew McCann

I was looking for an interdisciplinary approach to "food" grounded in the dirt of agricultural science. I found this unique combination at UMB. It turned out to be just an entry point. In Ås, I was introduced to the most comprehensive and hopeful mix of approaches to societal development that I have ever encountered. From experience-based education and a reflective focus on the process of learning itself, to a prioritization of participant engagement, collective visioning and concrete action, not to mention an intellectual grappling with the fundamental concepts of ecology and systems thinking - WOW, what a methodological constellation! At the heart of UMB's lessons are holistic definitions of agroecology and food systems which continue to guide my work every day.

During my last weeks in Ås, in November and December 2004, I had an intellectual crisis. I imagined two juggernauts of history destined for a cataclysmic conflict in the decades ahead. On the one hand there is the powerful global movement towards sustainable farm and food systems. It is often a bottom-up affair, driven by farmers, activists, academics and eaters working towards relocalization and rediversified farming in light of the convergence of global challenges such as the three peaks - oil, soil and water - and climate change. On the other hand there is the top-down revolution of agrobiotechnology driven by the global gene giants, government research funding, technological visions of Darwinian survivalism, and hundreds of thousands of brilliant lab rats all around the world who are busy mapping genomes and proteomes as I write. These two camps are as internally diverse as they are opposed to each other, but my fear in 2004 was that the conflict between them over how to feed the world would lead to massive upheavals - protests in the streets, gunshots, hunger, gated research communities, dramatic ecological experiments in synthetic biology, frustrated and angry citizens with half-rebuilt regional food systems. I realized that food could replace politics, religion and trade as the central theme of global security and struggle in the 21st Century.

My studies in Ås provided the framework to tackle this nightmare scenario. I would seek peace between the two worlds, which I came to think of as "local organic vs. ag biotech".

Through research and 6 months of experience-based learning in a lab as part of the Canadian Potato Genome Project, I came to realize that molecular biology is a beautiful way of understanding life at the intimate level of cellular reproduction. How could this knowledge and its passionate practitioners be reconciled with their brethren in the world of sustainable farm and food systems? As they say in ag biotech, "The technology is in the seed". What kind of seeds do we need for a sustainable future? I soon realized that this is in fact the question which drives many biotechnologists, but the short-term need for return on investment gears the GMO pipeline towards seeds that can turn a Roundup Ready profit next season, not towards the needs of our children's children. The economic imperatives and intellectual property rights ruthlessness of Monsanto and company fuel the fires of anti-biotech distrust and protest. Rightly so. But this animosity has hindered communication and collaboration between two groups who must work together to shape a practical future vision for our local-global food systems, even though the longer-term outcome may be a genetically engineered post-agricultural 22nd Century. But Civilization has to make it that far first, and we will need all the creative power of the sustainable food movement and the wizardry of biotech labs to do so in peace.

So, that's a summary of my still in-the-works agroecology masters thesis. Thank goodness for Geir's patience, and for the program's flexibility and respect for academic diversity. The lessons of Norway have informed the array food system development activities which have taken up much of my time since I left Ås and returned to Canada in December 2004.

AGROECOLOGY MASTER OF SCIENCE (UMB)

Andrew McCann, continued

During 2006 and 2007 I worked with the National Farmers Union as the co-coordinator of Food Down the Road: Toward a Sustainable Local Food System for Kingston and Countryside. This movement is community development at its finest, and the local food system of the region I live in is thriving thanks to the hundreds of people engaged in these efforts. Please see the www.fooddowntheroad.ca website for more info. I brought the food system model and visioning process I learned about at UMB into the strategic heart of Food Down the Road.

I enjoyed the hustle and bustle of networking, event organizing, lobbying, partnership development, proposal writing, economic development planning, and media relations, but my heart is in research, knowledge creation and idea sharing. I was lucky to have the chance to design and teach a course at St. Lawrence College here in Kingston last fall which was entitled "Field to Fork: Becoming a 21st Century Food Citizen". I have recently designed a second course which I will teach this coming September as a response to the mounting global food crisis: "The Real Cost of Food: Making Sense of Rising Food Prices and How the World Will Eat in the Future". There is the possibility that these courses will lead towards a new program in sustainable food studies at the College. If this happens, the methodology of UMB's agroecology program will be central in its development.

I returned to Canada this week from 6 months spent overseas, mostly in Mae Hong Son, a small town in the northeast corner of Thailand, a few kilometers from the Burmese border. My wife was working there with Burmese refugees, while I shacked up with a suitcase full of books, notes, and this laptop to work on my thesis. What a amazing place to write! I also made time for a few adventures into the local food system and have 3 hours of video interviews with local farmers, processors, market vendors, restaurant owners and government officials which I will use for teaching purposes this fall.

Something that struck me as I struggled to keep up with international news during this time away was how powerful the internet is as a tool for global communications. I have decided that my next project, post-thesis, will be the creation of a local-global food systems news and research website that can serve as a hub for food systems ideas from all around the world. There are lots of food policy and research organizations with websites out there, and plenty of farm and food NGO websites, but nothing that connects them in an "objective" journalistic fashion, offering a daily stream of links to news items, video clips, and in depth research on the local and global food systems (including the world of ag biotech), as far as I can tell. The time is ripe for such a site, which I hope to gear up by 2009. Please send me an email at mccann17@yahoo.com if you are interested in this project, or have models for me to learn from. In the meantime, good luck with all your endeavours in the food system! We are all so lucky to have such exhilarating work to do, and such a great program to build our individual and collective visions and efforts upon.



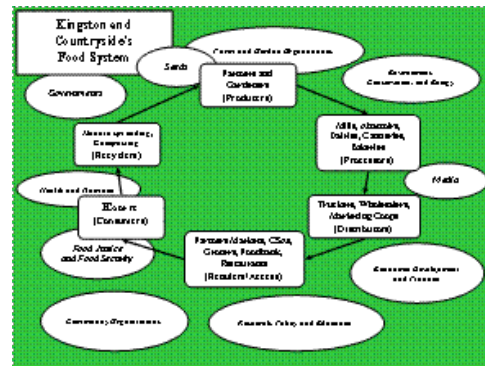
Local Food Summit
Participate in charting the future of farming and food for Kingston and countryside
November 2-4, 2007
Kingston, Ontario
Featuring key note speaker
Thomas Homer-Dixon
Local Food Systems and Social Resilience
FOOD DOWN THE ROAD

Local Food Summit Schedule

Friday, November 2, 7pm-10pm
Sydenham St. United Church, 82 Sydenham St.
Local Food Systems and Social Resilience
Thomas Homer-Dixon
Thomas Homer-Dixon's keynote address will start the Summit with the big picture. Homer-Dixon is one of the few thinkers able to synthesize the many challenges facing our society and our planet, and offer a hopeful and practical vision for a sustainable future. Local farms and food are key to the renewed civilization he calls for.

Saturday, November 3, 9am-5:30pm
St. Lawrence College, 100 Portsmouth Ave.
Inspiring talks • 18 dynamic workshops
Community distasts • Fun for the whole family
Learn about our local food system and how to change it. Find out how much is going on in our community already and the directions we are moving toward. See workshop options on the reverse.

Sunday, November 4, 9am-2:30pm
St. Lawrence College, 100 Portsmouth Ave.
Participate in creating the Local Food Declaration
Summit participants will collectively create the Local Food Declaration, a statement of principles and practical directions for the future of farming and food in Kingston and countryside.



La Escuela Popular Campesina Kab`awil: The first folk college in Latin America

By Ina Henriette Iversen Torp



After graduating from high school in Norway, it is common to spend a year at a folk college. This school lasts for a year and gives the students the possibility to devote their time and energy to their favourite subject without being examined or graded. The schools are founded on alternative pedagogic principles where personal development, practical knowledge, and student participation are the focus. The idea behind the folk college has now reached Guatemala through a Mayan indigenous peasant farmers organisation.

The sign and the name: The popular peasant farmers school Kab`awil. Kab`awil is a Mayan word meaning "Double sight", for a spirit being with the ability to see simultaneously up and down, near and far, day and night, good and bad, past and future. Basically, it is a profound and integrated strategic philosophy.



The classes are interactive & the students are motivated to participate and contribute actively throughout the day.

tion named Kab`awil, and the Norwegian folk college Sund. In February this year, the fifth student group of 15 students aged 14-22 years from agrarian, indigenous families from all around the country started their folk college year!

What is new this year is that they have bought a plot of five hectares in the community Estancia de la Virgen in the middle of Southwest Guatemala to build their own folk college. The construction of the new buildings is done voluntarily by engaged students, their families and members of Kab`awil.



The school building, to be completed by October 2008

A vision of increasing the educational level

Statistic shows that the illiteracy rate among the population in Guatemala is 30.9% (36.7% for women and 24.6% for men). But among the indigenous population, the illiteracy rate overall was 52.2%, according to the WHO. In addition, those who attend school experience a traditional school system characterized by an authoritarian teacher who instructs the students to memorize subjects without motivating them or asking for critical opinions or analyses.



Using alternative learning methods: the students can also develop their creative skills.

“Perspiration, tears & blood for Mother Earth”

The students in La Escuela Popular Campesina Kab`awil learn how to see their society from different perspectives and question their situation as part of their history and the Spanish arrival in the early 16th century. The school motivates the students to determine their own views and to become active in planning their lives and goals. They have to take responsibility for what they do, as well as to think about what is best for the whole. Also, they are being motivated to take action and become future activists and continue the fight for land for poor indigenous peasant farmers. The people who run the school believe working with the youth is the best starting point. They are the future! And they hope to train the students to become political leaders who can make new initiatives for developing the agrarian system.



The students take responsibility for all practical issues such as cooking food & cleaning the house. Here is one student cutting up fire wood.



The Mayan year is 250 days long. The students learn how to celebrate New Year`s Eve by acknowledging their forefathers, asking for forgiveness for the past and good spirit for the year to come. The ceremony is done with a special combination of fruits, flowers, sugar and candles which all have their special symbolic meaning.

The indigenous struggle for land is both spiritual and material. Therefore, the classes are divided between practical knowledge about farming practices, natural resource management and organisation & administration, and teachings about the Mayan spirit and traditional culture. They believe in an integrated union between God (viewed as the spirit in everything), nature and humans. Earth is therefore seen as part of every human being, and destroying the earth means destroying ourselves. After years of mistreating Mother Earth, impoverishing the land and setting the interaction between humans and earth out of balance, change has to come. Therefore, teaching organic principles in agriculture is part of the curriculum. It also complements one of their slogans: “Por la recuperacion de la Madre Tierra, Kab`awil presente” (For the recuperation of Mother Earth, Kab`awil is present!)

For more information about Kab`awil: www.kabawil.org .



Learning to trust each other! Together we can reach high!!!